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SUBJECT: OBASANJO VISITS WARRI; HOLDS MEETING WITH WARRING
ETHNIC GROUPS

1. (SBU) According to press reports and Warri contacts, President Obasanjo traveled to Warri the morning of September 19 for an aerial tour of the violence-affected areas in the Warri creeks and a meeting with elders and youth leaders of the three ethnic groups in the area.

2. (SBU) Corporate Responsibility Officer (CRO) spoke by telephone with Daniel Reyenieju, President of the Itsekiri National Youth Council, who attended the three-hour meeting with Obasanjo. Reyenieju claimed that the President first toured the Warri creeks by helicopter after arriving from Abuja in the morning. Shortly after noon, Obasanjo hosted a meeting with representatives of the three ethnic groups -- Uhrobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri -- at the Petroleum Training Institute in Effurun, close to Warri town. Chief Oyomike lead the Itsekiri group of 12, which included Reyenieju and one other Itsekiri youth leader. Chief Mamu stood in for Chief E.K. Clark (who is in the U.S.) in leading the Ijaw delegation, which included the president of the militant group FNDIC, Bello Oboko. FNDIC Advisor Dan Ekpedibe confirmed Oboko's attendance in a separate phone conversation with CRO.

3. (SBU) According to Reyenieju, each ethnic delegation gave a full presentation of its position on the current fighting. Obasanjo responded with an appeal that all sides sustain the ongoing ceasefire and have faith in two federal government committees working to address Warri's problems -- the Warri Conflict Committee chaired by former Defense Minister T.Y. Danjuma and the LGA Reform Committee chaired by Liman Ciroma. The President reportedly commented on his overflight of the war-torn areas of Warri that morning by saying he was "not happy with the extent of damage" he saw among villages and oil installations. Obasanjo highlighted the seriousness of the theft of oil or "bunkering" occurring in the Warri area, but downplayed the Nigerian military's "Operation Restore Hope." The Itsekiri leader claimed that the President eschewed a redefinition of Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Warri region as the solution to the current crisis, which was the solution advocated by the Ijaw and Uhrobo delegations. The Itsekiri delegation instead called for the Government to enforce existing law in the region.

4. (C) Comment: Press reports that this is only the second visit by Obasanjo as President to Warri (the last in 1999 after a similar but smaller outbreak of fighting) seem accurate and underscore its significance. The surprise visit reflects the Presidency's growing concern over lost revenues from the six month-old shutdown of production as well as the serious loss of life three weeks ago. The federal government continues a two-track approach to the crisis: attempting to negotiate a peace through allusions to political reforms in the area while hinting at a harsh military crackdown if any persist in fighting.

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